

# **EAST PROVIDENCE SCHOOL DEPARTMENT**

**East Providence City Hall**

**145 Taunton Avenue**

**East Providence, Rhode Island 02914**

## **School Committee Meeting**

**February 26, 2008**

### **Open Session**

**Mrs. Morris called the meeting to order at 5:30PM. School Committee Members Present: Stephen DeCastro, Robert Faria, Eileen Lovett, Steven Santos and Mildred Morris. Also present: Dr. Jacqueline B. Forbes, Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Robert Silva, Esq. and Andrew Thomas, Esq. A motion was made by Mrs. Lovett to move to Executive Session in accordance with RI General Laws, Section 42-46-5 (a) (1) Personnel, (a) (2) Collective Bargaining/Litigation, seconded by Mr. Faria. Vote 5-0.**

**Public Session reconvened at 8:00PM. A motion was made by Mrs. Lovett to return to open session and to seal the minutes of the Executive Session, seconded by Mr. DeCastro. Vote 5-0.**

**The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag was led by Mrs. Lovett and a Moment of Silence was observed.**

## **Record of Previous Meetings - None**

### **Chair's Report**

**Nate Lovett, Student Liaison, presented a report on high school activities; Senior Projects, NEASC accreditation visit in March, painting at the high school by students, spring sports, and a volleyball fundraiser.**

**Mrs. Morris announced that she will not seek reelection in 2008 after completing 12 years of elected service.**

### **Hearings - None**

### **Reading of Communications - None**

### **Report of Superintendent and Staff**

**Dr. Forbes offered thanks to Mrs. Morris for her unending service and thanks to Eileen Lovett for always putting students first. A presentation was made to Mrs. Lovett by Mrs. Morris and Dr. Forbes.**

**Dr. Forbes reported that the Roger Williams University Feasibility Study had been completed and copies were provided to the City Manager and Superintendent. Dr. Forbes presented copies to the School Committee; however, it will not be discussed at this time until**

**the School Committee reviews it. The report contains recommendations that the School Committee and City Council will need to review and provide direction to the Superintendent. At the School Committee's direction, a joint meeting can be scheduled with the City Council at a later date. Dr. Forbes read from the report "We applaud the improvements in the level of educational attainment by students in the East Providence School System. This is a tribute to the Superintendent, her staff, and certainly East Providence School teachers and students." Dr. Forbes said there is a need to recognize and celebrate this, since our schools have gone from progressive support and intervention to high and moderately performing schools. Dr. Forbes offered appreciation to the staff.**

**FY 2007-08 Financial Report – Dr. Forbes reported that the monthly financial report had been presented at the February 12th meeting. Mr. Faria asked about \$446,000 in bills outstanding for special education services. Mr. Capron explained that the total amount of the bills has been posted and accrued; this is a cash flow problem. Mr. Santos asked about the meals tax at \$500,000 towards the deficit; we will only get about \$100,000 and the deficit is \$400,000; he felt this was very distressing; we seemed to be on target and now in deficit. Mr. Capron reminded School Committee that health insurance buyback payments amounting to \$500,000 were not included in the budget.**

**Personnel Recommendation – Mr. Barham presented the personnel report listing 52 additional layoffs. Dr. Forbes expects that teachers**

will be recalled and this additional list is due to budget constraints and teachers returning from leave. A motion was made by Mr. Faria to approve the Superintendent's recommendation, seconded by Mrs. Lovett. Discussion: Mrs. Morris said that the first round of layoffs listed about 51 non-tenured teachers and tonight there are 52 more layoffs with a total now at 103 teachers. She hopes 95% will be recalled; people are stressed out and she thinks this second list is not necessary. Mr. DeCastro agrees the number is high, but it is being done out of an abundance of caution because of the March 1st date. We should ask the General Assembly to change the law; if later in the school year, it would not be a problem. The Superintendent and staff do not have much choice because of the way the law is laid out. If we change the law, less people would have to be notified. The date could be May 1st. The School Committee worked on this last year and it went no where. Dr. Forbes explained that we have to retain the flexibility and this is not intended to cause stress. She has worked with many of these teachers on curriculum matters and she is sorry this action has to occur. Last year, she was criticized for not laying off enough; this is being done with a heavy heart and she hopes all will be recalled. She asked that everyone please focus on teaching and learning, as we do not know what the future brings.

Mr. Faria related that every time we lay off teachers due to budgetary constraints, we lose some very good ones, which is a very sad fact. Mr. Santos explained that the School Committee has to act not to miss the deadline and this is not something they want to do, but have

to act according to the law as it is now. He hopes to be able to recall everyone also. This is a difficult decision, but there is no flexibility. We need to continue to put pressure on the legislature; the March 1st date is ridiculous. Mrs. Lovett also said everyone needs to keep at the legislation, because every year teachers get knocked down and are expected to come back up. She finds it difficult to put them on a list. Mrs. Morris thought only the first list was necessary. Roll Call Vote: Mr. DeCastro, aye; Mr. Faria, aye; Mrs. Lovett, nay; Mr. Santos aye; Mrs. Morris, nay. Vote 3-2, motion carried.

Facilities Update – Mr. Joseph Tavares, updating the status of the heating system at the high school, reported that a representative from Industrial Combustion and Hurst Boiler will be at the high school all this week to make adjustments to the burner. Mr. DeCastro asked to make sure both fuels are used. Dr. Forbes is sure they will not leave until the boilers are running efficiently and she is meeting again on Thursday and will update the School Committee again at that time. Mrs. Morris asked about Sprague Oil. Dr. Forbes is waiting for the exact measurements in order to give specifics to the oil company. Mr. DeCastro hopes we have low content on sulfur and we need to check out the oil. Mrs. Morris commented on the water heater exchange in the cafeteria. Mr. Santos asked to make sure that the work is performed to our satisfaction before the company leaves and he would also like the issue of burning more oil this year than last to be reviewed. Mr. Tavares is working on those numbers for last year vs. this year. Mr. Santos felt that if we find more oil was burned this

year than last, someone owes us something and this needs to be addressed.

Mr. Tavares reported on project eyesore; nine rooms painted at the High School with thanks to students, parents and maintenance staff. Hinges were also replaced. At Whiteknact School, there have been many untruths circulating about the school being closed. The school was never closed; three air quality tests were done; there was no evidence of unhealthy levels of mold. Additional testing was done on February 8th by Mr. Cabral of the R.I. Department of Health and he will report on this at a later date, because he is on vacation. Mr. Tavares read from Mr. Cabral's letter, which indicated that "no items of imminent health risk or regulatory violation were identified." The roof leaks have all been repaired and we are in the process of gathering bids for preventative maintenance. Mrs. Morris asked about charges for the roof calls. Mr. Tavares has been checking the roof all weekend; the fire department checked air quality readings today, and will retest tonight and tomorrow morning. The building has never been unsafe. Mr. Tavares said he received a call today about an odor in one of the rooms and he sent an HVAC person right over. Dr. Forbes advised that safety protocols were followed and all electrical, mechanical, etc. checked out; nothing was found. Every time Mr. Tavares or other school personnel went to the school, no odors were detected. On a third visit, children were moved to another room as a precautionary measure. At 1:20PM, the Building Inspector arrived at

the building and called the fire dept. because he said that children were ill. Dr. Forbes also went to the school and no evidence was found of any odors. A good cleaning had been done in the vents by vacuuming earlier in the morning and there were crayons, stickers, and other things in the heating unit and this may have had something to do with it. The fire Department will be checking the school again to make sure the school is safe. Mr. DeCastro had a concern that staff and parents get reports, as soon as Mr. Cabral returns from vacation; he wants to make sure copies are available to parents and teachers and to share all the information.

Dr. Forbes said she noted this in the Connect Ed messages she sent. She asked for help from other city departments to make sure all departments are working together to make sure schools are safe.

Curriculum Report – Mr. Edward Daft reported that at the January School Committee meeting, Mr. DeCastro asked about how progress monitoring for students is done and what type assessments are used.

Mrs. Beth Salzillo, Reading Supervisor, explained that the district's assessment plan uses varied and quality assessments to measure student progress. A standards based curriculum has been implemented in East Providence Schools; standards inform us as to what each child should know and be able to do at each grade level. The state of Rhode Island has adopted rigorous and comprehensive standards, Grade Level Expectations/Grade Level Spans, which are more specific in nature and give both students and teachers a fixed

target at which to aim. The East Providence Curriculum Frameworks have aligned our district wide curriculum with the state's GLES and GSES. These frameworks provide our teachers, students and parents with clear and well defined expectations in all subjects at each grade level. Standards based report cards have been implemented at the elementary level and we are currently working on a district wide assessment schedule in grades K-12 which defines what assessment tools we are currently using in the district to monitor student progress.

Mr. DeCastro asked what else could be done if money were no object and he asked to define performance based assessments. Mrs. Salzillo explained that the assessments identify strengths and weaknesses to parents; standardized testing is expensive and large blocks of time are needed to administer them. Mr. Daft stated that technology to access student's information is needed and Dr. Forbes would like teachers to have access to progress data. Dr. Forbes will arrange to have a proposal for discussion at a future meeting.

Report of Sub-Committees – Mr. Faria felt that everyone needs to start thinking about the 2008-2009 budget, as he has ideas about improving the process over last year. Also, a negotiations team has been put together to begin contract negotiations. A schedule of meeting dates may be available by the next meeting.



## **Unfinished Business**

**I.E. School Committee By-Laws– Amended Policy – Second Passage – Dr. Forbes recommended second passage. A motion was made by Mr. Faria, seconded by Mrs. Lovett Vote 5-0.**

**Health Insurance Update – Dr. Forbes requested that Mr. Barham present his analysis on the W.B. Collaborative information. Mr. Dooley from West Bay Collaborative was present to answer questions. Mr. Barham analyzed the retention rates, savings and advantages of joining the collaborative. He explained that the size of the collaborative makes it easier to negotiate the Blue Cross rate; the disadvantage is the reinsurance. Mr. Dooley promised to negotiate with the re-insurer to get the 18 down to 14.36. Dr. Forbes recommended approval by the School Committee to join W.B. Collaborative effective July 1, 2008.**

**Mr. DeCastro wanted to thank Mr. Frazier of Blue Cross for his help and intervention, as we are now at a point where we can get competitive with collaborative rates. He asked about the fee to join. Mr. Dooley worked it into the 39.50 rate (administration rate \$1.00); Blue Cross is 38.50 per contract, per month. Mr. DeCastro said this is not until July 1st but there is an advantage even though not part of today, we will get the collaborative rate . He asked about reducing the reinsurance rate. Mr. DeCastro said this is purely an administrative function and there is no difference to the members as**

the contracts remain as is, but it could be a cash flow issue.

Mr. Dooley explained that the surplus remains in our account to lower the rate next year; if a bad year, there would be a rate increase to make up the shortfall. Mr. Dooley advised that the reserve is an interest free loan; a \$1 million reserve in a separate fund in a group account with administrative fees and investment over time. Mr. DeCastro asked if the fund grew over time Mr. Dooley responded that it does to a certain level and is reapportioned to members.

Mrs. Morris asked about other communities. Dr. Forbes said if approved, a member will have full voting rights and administrative fees cover all expenses. Mr. Dooley said the fund is audited and they are looking into a dental and health insurance pool and will be doing some value added programs in the future. They will be checking Blue Cross claims to make sure the charges are made correctly to member accounts. Mr. DeCastro said there is no incentive with a self insured plan and now we will have someone working on our behalf.

Mr. Santos was not convinced about it; the rate is better than what we have now but he would like to do better, as this does not give us leverage to find a better plan; these are his concerns.

Mr. DeCastro commented that we are locked into a Blue Cross plan with an 8% increase next year and looking at \$79 vs. \$30 and he does not see how we cannot do it. Mr. Barham advised that we looked at other plans and could not find anything better and it makes financial sense to do this. Mr. Dooley advised that Blue Cross guarantees

**W.B. Collaborative a better rate than any others, except the City of Providence. Mr. Faria agreed it was a better rate for the value and the goal is to have one collaborative; he felt it was necessary for us to join. Motion by Mr. DeCastro, seconded by Mr. Faria. Roll call vote: DeCastro, aye; Faria, aye; Lovett, aye; Santos, nay; Morris, nay. 3-2 to approve.**

**Retiree Health Care Costs - Mr. DeCastro said he received calls from retirees asking if they could pay the difference between the plan we have now and their prior plan, if it does not cost the School Department any money. A motion was made by Mr. DeCastro to allow the retirees to pay the difference between the current plan now and what they had before with a 2% administrative fee. Dr. Forbes related that Blue Cross said it is possible to do this. Mr. Faria had a problem with going with one plan and then going back to having more than one plan. Mr. DeCastro thought that as long as we charge a 2% fee, since it is always about the money, and we are already overspent by \$400,000, if someone wants to pay the difference for ABC plan vs. XYZ plan it would be OK. The motion was seconded by Mrs. Lovett for discussion. Mrs. Lovett said it was a shame we messed with the plan to begin with but we are now in the situation we have put ourselves in; this is a way to rectify it by allowing them to pay the difference. Mrs. Morris felt that our teachers retired with a package, it has been taken away from them, and we will be paying lawyers for this. Mr. Santos thought it was a difficult decision which was made to have one plan for all and now we are moving back and this is not**

**consistent and is opening a Pandora's box.**

**Roll call vote: Mr. DeCastro, aye; Mr. Faria, nay; Mrs. Lovett, aye; Mr. Santos, nay, Mrs. Morris, nay. Motion failed 3-2.**

**School Privatization – Mr. Decastro motioned to ask the Superintendent to examine if any firms exist which could do education for us. He would like to find out if any exist. No second; motion failed.**

## **New Business**

**II.F.3. Wellness Policy – Amended Policy – First Passage - Mr. Daft presented the policy which was adjusted to reflect the new state laws; he read the changes. Mrs. Morris stated that the wellness committee worked hard on this policy to see it put into place according to state law and all should comply with it. Mrs. Lovett was very happy about the changes as the kids deserve to have good food. A motion was made by Mrs. Lovett, seconded by Mr. Faria. Roll call vote: Mr. DeCastro, aye; Mr. Faria, aye; Mrs. Lovett, aye; Mr. Santos aye; Mrs. Morris, aye. Mr. Daft thanked District Nurse Coordinator, Kathleen Reese for her assistance in developing this policy.**

**Payment of Bills - None**

**Question and Answer Period**

**Jean Goulet, a retiree, had a question about the change in the Blue Cross plan. She received a letter and basics of the plan, but has yet to receive anything about what the plan entails; her card says one thing and the plan another and she has nothing to check. She asked for materials. Dr. Forbes apologized and promised that the Benefits Coordinator would resolve this.**

**Melissa Perry and David Medeiros had concerns about Whiteknact School. Mrs. Perry said that a parent took her child to the hospital with carbon monoxide poisoning; ten students were ill and the substitute nurse and principal told them it was all in their heads. As a parent, she believes that parents should be able to make decisions regarding their children being sick or not. She is concerned about Whiteknact School and that parents were not informed properly. Part of the dismissal log disappeared. She calls the building inspector when she feels there is a problem in the school; parents do not know what is going on. Mrs. Morris asked that she arrange an appointment with Dr. Forbes to arrange a meeting with parents. Mr. Faria said that communication is key; they need to have a meeting with Dr. Forbes.**

**Mark Dauphinee, parent of a child at Whiteknact said he was not comfortable with the principal and Superintendent and that he is part of the Cancer Control Task Force and will be asking the Mayor to conduct an investigation regarding incidents at Whiteknact School.**

**Roman Ofaris was a student at Waddington and spoke regarding the**

elimination of French at the middle schools. He said that by cutting it off at that point, there will not be anyone taking it in high school; if French is not available at an early age, kids will not go into it later and this stifles the opportunity. He spoke about his internship in France and pleads the department not be eliminated.

Mr. Santos received some comments regarding this issue and may want to reconsider. Regarding getting a foundation before High School, we may have been short sighted when making the decision to eliminate it and may want to look at this at a future meeting. Mrs. Morris suggested revisiting the issue.

Mr. Jack Fahey researched the air quality problem and referenced a report that 10 of 20 classrooms exceeded the CO 2 parts per million standard. He asked about the oxygen levels in the building and had questions about air quality. With the roof leaks, there is a problem with air in that building which needs to be addressed now. He wants to close the building and determine what the issues are for the safety of the children. Dr. Forbes responded that air quality tests were performed by R.I. Analytical and Department of Health and there was no danger to students or staff and no evidence of air quality problems at any time. The Building Inspector threatened to close the building.

Mr. Dauphinee said he is a certified HVAC engineer and there were problems with the reports. Mr. Santos asked if R.I. Analytical is fully certified and licensed. Mr. Tavares said they were recommended by

the Department of Health as highly qualified; he received a report from Department of Health, but Mr. Cabral of the Department of Health was on vacation and he was waiting for Mr. Cabral to explain the details of the report. He said that at no time were reports squashed.

Mr. DeCastro said that the data was collected by R.I. Analytical and sent out to labs for testing.

Mr. Tony Gouveia commented that Mr. Fahey made a public statement about school being closed as a leader of a political action committee. If the school was closed by the City and the School Committee does not know about it, there is a problem. He thought there should be a public announcement or press conference tomorrow morning as we cannot have community leaders waving documents at the camera; either the School Committee is right or he is wrong.

Dr. Forbes reported that to the best of her knowledge, school has not been closed by any authority A ConnectEd was sent to all families and faculty that more tests are being done this evening and if anything is found, parents would be contacted by ConnectEd message in the morning, similar to the ones sent out for inclement weather. Dr. Forbes was concerned that no information has been received to date from any official that any one is in danger regarding air quality or serious health conditions and she listens to the health experts, the Rhode Island Department of Health; she met with the building inspector, fire chief, city manager and all reports were

**provided and she offered to meet with parents. School is open at Whiteknact.**

**Bob Enos said that we should talk to students, parents and teachers; this is adding to the mental fright. He would like the State of RI to test the schools**

**Mrs. Morris commended the staff at Whiteknact. Dr. Forbes needs to balance the hysteria with fact and continue to focus on teaching and learning.**

**A motion was made by Mr. Santos to adjourn at 10:30PM, seconded by Mr. Faria. Vote 5-0.**

**Respectfully submitted,**

**Patricia A. Iannelli, Administrative Assistant**

**Eileen Lovett, Clerk of the Committee**